



# Information Bulletin

## *Governor's Office of Emergency Services Law Enforcement Branch*

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## **FIRESTORM SEARCH TACTICS**

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The East Bay Hills Fire, as it was officially termed, was also given many other names: Oakland Hills Firestorm, Berkeley/Oakland Fire, etc. Up to that date this had been one of California's costliest disasters, and it involved recovery issues that were complex and arduous. One such issue was the requirement to conduct a detailed, systematic, complete search of the affected areas for remains of victims of the fire. This task fell on the Sheriff of Alameda County, in cooperation with officials of the cities involved. The actual work was conducted by search and rescue [SAR] personnel, many of them volunteers, from dozens of teams throughout California, assisting peace officers, coroner personnel and other investigators.

In light of California's recent devastating fires local law enforcement officials will again face this difficult task. This Information Bulletin was developed to aid in that critical work. The following information and tactics were provided by Sheriff's SAR personnel from Alameda and Contra Costa Counties that were involved in the post fire search and recovery of victim remains following the East Bay Hills Fire. Agencies anticipating similar search missions should review the information provided, compare it with local training, equipment and procedural standards, and apply those aspects that fit the situation at hand.

### **MISSING PERSON REPORTING**

- It will be critical to collate all available missing person reports from the affected area in a timely, and centralized, fashion. Consider publicizing the contact number for making such reports on a wide basis, as travelers, visitors from outside the area, etc. may have been in the area despite evacuation or other closures and orders. These reports will assist in validating and cross checking search results from the affected locations.

## **DOCUMENTATION**

- The area involved is most likely a crime scene. Ensure that the scene is properly contained and monitored until search efforts begin.
- Document search efforts in writing and possibly through video recording of team activities.

## **SAFETY**

- Develop a Safety plan for area and types of structures to be searched.
- Determine known hazards in the area and hazards created by fire damage.
- Have qualified personnel on hand to determine if structures are safe to search. (Watch for basements or issues with homes built on hillsides.)
- Have fire department engine companies stand-by in search areas to aid with assessment or tools required for entry, and to handle any remaining hot spots or smoldering debris.
- Work teams only in daylight to maintain effectiveness and maximize safe working conditions.

## **HAZARDS**

- Hot ashes are a key issue. Surface cooling causes a crust to harden over still glowing ashes, and unsuspecting searchers can break through the crust when attempting to walk on such a surface, causing burns. This was also a problem for search dogs and handlers. Other hazards include floor collapse, downed wires, appliances, nails, broken glass, swimming pools covered with debris, burned utility poles, basements, weakened street lights and signals, broken pipes and hazards from burned out buildings and their contents.

## **PLANNING SUPPORT**

- Because the search may include small fragments of human remains, consider using the first "find" of victim remains to train other search teams to better understand the nature of what they are searching for.
- Identify maps for search area. Tract maps, Fire Department run books or utility maps work best. Maps should show each residence with an address. Segment the maps into sectors. Specialized mapping such as current aerial over-flights can be a significant aid in navigating and searching through the fire-altered terrain. Consider use of GPS.
- Be sure to clarify where teams are to search, where sector boundaries include streets and overlap (which side of street to search). Note: most addresses will not be visible, use addresses on curbs or house count from intersection to identify addresses.

- Mark individual locations in accordance with standard the Urban Search and Rescue [USAR] marking system. (This is available from your local fire department, or contact OES.) Mark on driveway cuts, as most houses had a driveway. If not mark on sidewalk in front of structure or area in front.
- Note that street signs will probably be gone. If possible remake or paint street on street or curb line near intersections.
- If possible identify the type of structure to be searched. Single story, two story, tract home, etc. to determine best approach to searching the property.
- Vehicles should also be marked according to the USAR standard. If a license plate can be located on vehicle, that number should also be painted on the vehicle for easy recognition.

## SEARCHES

- For briefings have a “general briefing” for all personnel regarding items related to the incident such as the safety plan and mission objectives. Then assemble individual teams and conduct a “mission specific briefing” for their search area and specific objective(s).
- Initial Area Search – First conduct a systematic search of all the residences and vehicles in the fire-damaged area. This is done by search teams of 10-12 persons going into areas and conducting thorough searches of the assigned areas, making notations of search results and areas that could not be searched due to conditions.
- Investigative Search – This is a search conducted by 3-4 person teams deployed to a specific address or location of known missing persons in the area. These teams checked specific locations and the surrounding area to locate the missing subject(s). Additionally, if there is a description of a vehicle belonging to the missing person, the team is alerted to look for the vehicle. These teams also include cadaver-trained search dogs as part of the response to help clear the area.
- Since residents may be allowed back into the search area, all teams should also conduct contact interviews with residents regarding accountability of persons in their residence and also that of their neighbors when available.
- Field supervisors should “roam” the search areas to monitor progress and resolve problems.
- Advise teams on how to handle “finds.” Have a special radio code for this situation, and define what actions teams should take. Use of a code avoids premature alerting of the news media to a find. Note GPS coordinates if these devices are in use.
- Special teams called “find teams” can be formed. Usually these include Police/Sheriff and Coroners/Medical Examiners office representatives. If the fire involves arson, include homicide investigators.

## LOGISTICS

- Teams should be required to have proper personal protective equipment [PPE]. Heavy-duty boots or safety boots, coveralls or long sleeve garments, helmets, gloves and eye protection should be included. Teams have been issued dusk masks or similar respiratory protection in the past, but high-energy particle attracting [HEPA] filter masks should be considered. Teams should be provided with marking paint, lumber crayons and barricade tape to cordon off extreme hazards encountered.
- Each team should be deployed with a medical kit to treat injuries that may be sustained by their team pending the arrival of medical personnel. Most injuries are likely to be minor, such as small cuts, burns and foreign matter in the eye.
- Each team should have at least one radio issued to them. Consider issuance of GPS.
- Prepare the teams for a complete day in the field. Provide food to take with them or be prepared to feed teams deployed in the field (sack/box lunches).
- Have plenty of fluids available.
- Provide locations for clean up prior to demobilization; conduct a debriefing.

How does an agency go about obtaining sufficient personnel to undertake such a task? California's Law Enforcement and Coroner Mutual Aid Systems have been successfully used to meet other difficult challenges. The same systems can meet these challenges as well. The OES Law Enforcement Branch can assist any local agency in understanding and utilizing these systems, and can facilitate mission tasking of teams and special resources throughout the state.

How might an organization meet the logistical needs of such an event in terms of communications, mobile command posts, or consumable resources to support the mission? Again, members of the OES Law Enforcement Branch can be of help. In some cases, OES has resources available for loan. In other cases they can advise local officials on the applicability of disaster reimbursement programs, should the local agency desire to rent or purchase these facilities or items of equipment.

The OES Law Enforcement Branch staff can be reached on a 24 hour basis by calling (916) 845-8700. Staff members are assigned to various areas of the state, and a duty officer is available at all times.

*This information was drafted by Ron Seitz and Roger Kendle of the Alameda County Sheriff's Department, and was edited and amplified by Michael Griffin, Stan Roberts and Michael Guerin of the OES Law Enforcement Branch.*